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ABSTRACT

This paper briefly discusses: violence as a context for verbal abuse; the legacy of student discipline in schools; a model indicating that verbal abuse is learned; data showing teachers do verbally abuse students; and a variety of ways to deal with this problem. Factors inducing teachers to exhibit aggressive behavior are identified and include: the teachers' past experiences; the rewards or consequences to their behavior; and their own immediate level of stress. The following strategies that teachers can use to reduce verbal abuse are provided: (1) learn to identify feelings by listening to words and body; (2) practice thought stopping; (3) turn to teaching peers for advice and assistance on interaction patterns with students; (4) look at issues of transference; (5) join with the parents of a student whose behavior is presenting difficulty; (6) be honest and complete a frank and detailed accounting of biases; (7) accept that self-learning may mean more inwardly directed anger; (8) take concrete steps to avoid social isolation; (9) recognize that control is undoubtedly a deep seated cause of verbal abuse; and (10) cultivate the capacity to self assess and self correct. (Contains 7 references.) (CR)

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Teachers As Verbal Perpetrators

Council For Exceptional Children

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine if you would, the following conversations between a child and their parent:

> "Mom, Mr. Yee doesn't like me and always says good things about my dad, he knows you guys are divorced"
>
> or
>
> "Mr. Washington yells at us all the time"
>
> or possibly
>
> "I hate Mrs. Stans class, she is really mean and grouchy, today the girl next to me got yelled at and started to cry".

If you have heard these kind of remarks or know a person who says or does these things, then what we have to say to you today will be useful.

We are a Clinical Psychologist and an Educational Psychologist. Our professional life has been filled with victims of abuse and their victimizers. As professionals we abhor any type of abuse. Despite the fact that the identification, evaluation and treatment of abusing individuals have been a significant part of our professional life, we can never become inured or desensitized to it. In this paper we present: a brief discussion of violence as a context for verbal abuse; the legacy of student discipline; a model indicating that verbal abuse is learned; data showing teachers do verbally abuse students; and lastly a variety of ways to deal with this problem.

VIOLENCE: THE CONTEXT FOR VERBAL ABUSE

Violence and verbal abuse is not a new problem; in fact it probably is as old as humankind. Yet is wasn't until 1968 that public outcry was truly heard about the physical and psychological abuse of children. Over the past 30 years significant amounts of public and professional attention has been focused on this problem. Recently, increasing attention is being paid to various types of verbal and emotional abuse. Both are regarded as forms of psychological violence.

It is true that terms such as psychological maltreatment, emotional abuse or verbal abuse may be somewhat "slippery". However, verbal abuse has been defined as:

> Psychological maltreatment of children and youth consists of acts of omission and commission which are judged on the basis of a combination of community standards and professional expertise to be psychologically damaging. Such acts are committed by individuals, singly or collectively, their characteristics (e.g., age, status, knowledge, organizational form) are in a position of differential power that renders a child vulnerable. Such acts damage immediately or ultimately the behavioral, cognitive, affective, or physical functioning of the child. Examples of psychological maltreatment include acts of rejecting, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting, and missocializing. (p.6 Hart, Germain, & Brassard, 1987).

Most of us accept that violence is at an all time high and seems to be increasing. That we are a violent society is chilling. Each day new and more disturbing school based violent acts are reported in the media. There was a time, not long ago, we believed that violent acts were more common among the poor, urban, young male minorities, school dropouts and people who were mentally ill. As teachers and educators we truly believed that violent acts were more common with "them" "not us". We now know that violent school based acts can exist anywhere.

Paradoxically, much denial on the part of many educators exist. Moreover, many don't see ourselves or our peers as violent or abusive. Even among teachers and other educators, the more subtle form of violence or abuse go unrecognized, misunderstood, and unfortunately ignored. Frequently, it is passed off with comments like "John is a strong disciplinarian" or "Mary needs to hold the line with that group." But it is time for us as educators to look at the role we play in verbal abuse.

THE LEGACY

Despite our personal beliefs, debate and legislation regarding its value, the field of education has long accepted the value of verbal and physical deterrents, under the guise of "discipline". Look back to your training, were you encouraged to maintain order by using a commanding voice or a sharp word? Most of you can recall incidents when

teachers have yelled at, belittled or ignored a student. Regrettably, we need to acknowledge this history in our schools. Kemper and Cook 1993; Davidson 1987; Hyman and Lally 1982; Ingraham 1977; as well as Wood and Lakin 1978 all document this legacy.

THE PROBLEM

There is much evidence that punishing, growth debilitating acts occur in the classroom. Lynda Neese concluded that educators can be perpetrators. (Neese 1989). She stated:

> "Research has supported the existence of psychological maltreatment within the school setting. Krugman and Krugman (1984) investigated third- and fourth-grade classrooms and found psychologically abusive teacher behaviors that included using disparaging remarks, labeling, screaming at children, making inappropriate threats, displaying inconsistent behavior, allowing some children to harass others, setting unrealistic academic goals, using physical punishment, and using homework as punishment."

It is true some things have changed for the better. Physical violence is no longer a norm in non-institutional schools today. However, we continue to witness an increase in teachers who use harsh words, mean spirited statements, demeaning tones or withholding behaviors to control classrooms. One recent study (Weagraff and Lorenzo 1998) of teachers showed that verbal abuse (i.e. emotional trauma) is still a problem. They report of 391 teachers surveyed from 14 Central California School Districts that:

- "Almost 71 percent of participants could identify at least one incident in the past 3 months where they engaged in a verbally abusive situation with a student".
- "In overall incidents men lead women by about one-third. However, women tended to use passive behaviors of withholding."
- Overall, approximately 40 percent of the teachers surveyed reported that "...They tended to withdraw emotionally as a way to show disapproval."
- The most common verbal abuse reported dealt with belittling, minimizing, name calling or insulting."
- "Verbal abuse went down significantly with teacher longevity in the classroom.

- Verbal abuse was more common in classrooms where the teachers had two or less years of full-time experience.

In this study a random stratified sample of 391 teachers were studied. The research looked at patterns of verbal abuse across several variables including length of full-time teaching experience. The participants completed a questionnaire at two universities which offered in-service and/or credential programs for teachers. Forty-one percent of the teachers had 2 or less years of experience, nineteen percent had 5 or more years of full-time teaching experience.

But you may be thinking that this just doesn't really relate to most educators. Most teachers don't verbally abuse children. That it is the families that these students come from that really inflict the abuse. But WAIT A MINUTE. The truth is that there are many levels of verbal abuse and some are quite subtle. We might not even consider some incidents to be abusive and yet how many of us have used or heard sarcastic statements or humor directed at students? There is sometimes an ignorance of how subtle abuse is used by educators. (Donaldson, 1998). Educators do not rank their sites as abusive yet daily sarcasm and belittling is used to control student behavior.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Right now we want you to take a get into small groups of four and think back about an incident you remember that happened to you when you were student. This can have occurred anytime – even in college.

- *Think about the incident.*
- *Recall how you felt then and how you still feel about it.*

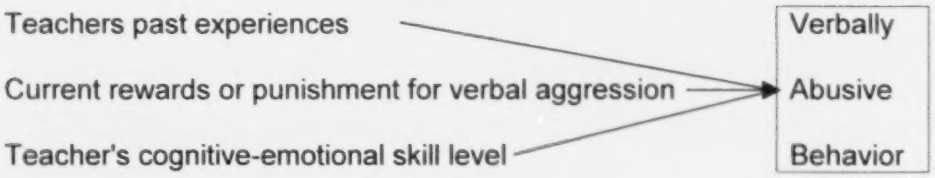
As educators we have a tremendous amount of power and our comments can stay with students throughout their lives. This is why it is so critical for us to use "growth enhancing" comments that help our students grow and learn and become independent, capable individuals.

VERBAL ABUSE IS LEARNED

Verbal abuse of anyone or anything such as a mate, a colleague a student or an animal is really learned behavior. How does it occur? Usually it occurs slowly over time, after exposure to events and situations. It starts with a type of response different from what we used in the past. This time the response really had an effect. Such situations are more apt to happen when we are under stress, in an environment that tolerates or reinforces negativity, and when we are feeling insecure and defensive. We need to be vigilant because most all of us can slip into negative verbal behaviors and under the right circumstances these can become frequent, and habitual.

Researchers have identified particular elements that induce aggressive behaviors (R. Baron and Dyrne, 1988). Building upon their ideas, we can break down these factors into three categories.

FIGURE 1



Let's break these factors down to more specific items.

1. The teacher's past experiences:
   - Has interpersonal abusive language been appropriate in their environments?
   - Have they been exposed to aggressive role models themselves?
   - Their level of communication skills and problem solving.
2. The rewards or consequences:
   - What is the climate they work in – are there rewards for good classroom management?
   - Are there realistic peer review systems/ do others know what they are doing?
   - Are students empowered or lack power?
3. Their own immediate level of stress:
   - Tolerance for frustration
   - Anger management skills

In other words, the more these factors are present the greater the possibility for verbal abuse. Remember verbal abuse can be blatant or it can be very subtle. Again as educators we tend to use a subtle form of abuse and many times are not even aware that we are doing it. We forget that a critical comment, a belittling statement, subtle putdown is something we say and rarely remember but it stays with the youngster - sometimes for life. Our sarcasm many times has a sharp edge to it that is very hurtful to our students. It is a form of purposeful intimidation and it really becomes a habit.

HEALING STRATEGIES - WHAT CAN YOU DO?

As teachers we need to become sensitive as to how students will perceive our comments. We also need to be aware of alternative ways of handling negative or non-compliant behavior and the situations that can invoke verbal abuse.
Take just a minute to identify the situations that you or a close peer is most likely to put down students, use sarcasm, make threatening statements and so forth. Find a pattern --- this can be a guide for *substituting more healthy interactions with your students.*

While there is much research to be done in this area, we have several suggestions for interventions. These interventions are both for systems to apply and for teachers' to personally use.

1. Learn to identify your feelings by listening to your words and body. Revisit how you communicate with children and youth. Involve them in this process.
2. Practice Thought Stopping - Psychotherapists who utilize Cognitive Behavioral Approaches suggest you:
   - identify the feeling or emotion
   - label it for what it is
   - pause, think and take a breath
   - speak slowly, exercise caution
3. Turn to your teaching peers for advice and assistance regarding how they view your interaction pattern with students.

4. Look at your own issues of transference. If you're a male, pay attention to issues of how you may view women. Be aware that each of us are the product of our environment.
5. Join with the parents of a student you tend to have difficulty with. Frequently, you will gain a "new perspective".
6. Be honest with yourself. Complete a frank and detailed accounting of your biases. Be cautious of stereotypical thinking. Also pay attention to "old baggage you might be carrying".
7. Accept that as you learn about yourself, that you may experience more self anger which will be inwardly directed.
8. Take concrete steps to avoid social isolation. Generally, studies show that people who are isolated have more aggressive styles when they are around people who are weaker and more vulnerable (i.e.: children and youth).
9. Recognize that control is undoubtedly a deep seated cause of verbal abuse. Do more empowerment of students. Lower your needs to be controlling.
10. Accept you have the capacity within yourself to self assess and self correct. Also accept that one cannot expect to simply "repair" dysfunctional thinking or actions. You need to make self correction part of your life. Insofar as possible, make all your family members integral parts of the change process.

But what do we do when it is our peers and school staff who verbally abuse students? This is becoming more and more important to us in special education as our students are spending far greater periods of time in regular education classes.

A recent study of special education teachers found that the majority of those who noted verbal abuse reported little or no in-service about behavior interventions at their sites (Donaldson, 1998). This is hopeful for it points out that there may be some immediate steps to address the problem. Some ideas you can use with peers and school staff are:

1. Model positive interactions at school.

2. Make sure that your schooi sets a positive climate for learning and relating to students.
3. Do not lash out at a verbally abusive person – it only makes them more defensive. Share that you recognize that they seem under stress. At a calm moment ask if you can help.
4. Use statements that "smooth and soothe" as a starter. Then use gentle confrontation. For example: "Irene, we have worked together for so much time and I've enjoyed it. I need to share ...". Use "I" statements not "you" statements.
5. If you need to point out a particular concern make sure it is specific and give the exact language that you are concerned about.
6. Make sure teachers at your site have adequate training to deal with behavioral challenges. Push for on-going district wide behavior management training opportunities.
7. Mentor new teachers and provide support for those under particular stress.

GROUP ACTIVITY

Let's role play a couple of situations that might occur at our school sites.
Do you have any specific situations that you might like to get input about?

CLOSING

Schools need to foster a positive school climate and provide for peer review. As leaders in your school(s) you need to help introduce policies and programs that help educators look at themselves and their schools. If we monitor ourselves and promote positive teacher-student interactions, then incidents of verbal abuse will decrease.

So verbal abuse arises from many factors. It is essential that we be aware of what subtle abuse involves and the situations where we are the most in danger of using it. We need to take an honest inventory of ourselves and our schools and set up environments where students are treated with respect and given helpful suggestions. If

we can do this, and encourage others to behave in verbally appropriate ways, then we will make great steps towards helping our students learn and develop healthy ways of relating to themselves and others.

Thank you for your interest in this topic.

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